

THE DANCE DIVINE

By P. R. KRISHNASWAMI IYER

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“In Thillai’s Court a mystic Dance the Lord performs,
Whomso that sees it torment not Samsaric storms;
Thillai’s Court is Human Heart and Siva is the Soul,
Whom the Yogis do in Bliss behold with senses in control.”

Lord Siva as Nritha Murti is called Nataraja – the Sovereign Dancer. On the “Arudra” day of the Margazhi month (Dhanurmas) every year a festival is celebrated in every Saivite temple in propitiation of “Sri Nataraja” and the votaries of Siva will throng in thousands for the sacred Arudra – Darsana on the occasion.

The grandest celebration, attracting the largest number of devotees for the most soul-stirring sight, is at Chidambaram. Nearer Madras, the festival is performed with equal grandeur at Thiruvallangadu – the Vataranya – where, according to some, the Lord performed the exquisite Dance originally, and vanquished Kali in Her Rival Dance by His “Urdhva Tandava” pose (in which one leg rests on the ground and the other is lifted up straight – parallel to the resting leg).

The history, science, art and philosophy of the Divine Dance have appealed to the greatest minds of the world and have been elaborately dealt with by both Indian and European scholars and “Nataraja” is viewed as the symbol of the synthesized science, art and religion.

The occasion of Siva’s Dance according to “Koil Puranam” was as follows: -

Once Siva went to confute a set of heretical sages of the Mimamsa school of thought who were living in the forest of Tharaka. The sages made mad attempts to destroy Him by all kinds of incantations and sacrificial fires and out of the latter emerged one by one, a tiger, a serpent and a malignant dwarf. Siva danced all along and after killing the tiger wore its skin. He made a garland of the snake and broke the dwarf’s back by the tip of His foot.

The five well-known Sabhas or Theatres of Siva’s Dance are Thiruvallangadu (Ratna Sabha), Chidambaram (Kanaka-Sabha), Madura (Rajata-Sabha), Tinnevely (Tamra-Sabha) and Kutralam (Chitra-Sabha). Darsana (sight) of the Dance on the occasion of the annual celebrations at any of the above centres on the “Arudra” day of the Margazhi month is believed to purge the beholders of all their sins, alleviate their sufferings and liberate from the sorrowful cycle of birth and death.

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The Nataraja Dance first revealed to the Rishis is known as “Nadanta” Dance and besides this there are two other well-known dances of Siva – the Deity Evening Dance and the Dance on the Smasana or the cremation grounds. The daily dance at night-fall in Kailasa is described in the Pradosha Stotra as follows: -

“Siva dances to the accompaniment of Veena (lute), flute, Tala (cymbals) and Mridanga (clay tomtom) respectively played on by Saraswathi. Indra, Brahma and Vishnu, Goddess Lakshmi (the Spouse of Lord Vishnu) singing; while the Gandharvas, Yakshas, Vidyadharas and hosts of all other beings dwelling in the three worlds and His Consort, Gauri – the Mother of the worlds – seated on a throne of gold and precious stones – witness the dance. The worship of Siva at Pradosha time every day means the worship of all deities collecting around Siva at the time and the worshipper becomes happy and prosperous.”

The Smasana Dance is considered by some as primitive and pre-Aryan and is attributed to Siva’s Tamasic aspect at Bhairava or Virabhadra and constitutes the mid-night revels of Siva and Kali on the cremation grounds. It is known as Tandava and its esoteric meaning according to Sakti and Sakta literature is destruction of man’s illusion and all other evils to which humanity is heir.

THE RENAISSANCE OF DANCE

Dance is an ancient art of universal appreciation and patronage. India is famous for its “Bharata Natya”. There are 108 kinds of dance according to the Natya Sastra. Dance is considered to be the most perfect physical exercise. Set to musical hymns in praise of God, it contributes at once to the physical suppleness and spiritual elevation of the dancer. The lofty ideals and noble effects of dance had been gradually receding from the human mind. In India the art was, till recently, practically relegated to professionals and dancing-girls dedicated to temples. The awakening of the ‘Dance’ consciousness followed by the abolition of the Devadasi class has restored the art to its legitimate dignity and noble standard, with the result that it is now looked upon as an enviable attainment of girls and a wholesome recreation for body, mind and spirit.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SIVA’S DANCE

The mystic dance of Siva is the manifestation of primal rhythmic energy. It denotes the kinetic aspect of the Cosmic Energy and the effulgent vitality of all creation. The divine “Chit” sustains and vitalizes everything. In the Universal Spirit the entire universe is born, borne and buried. The supreme consciousness permeates the entire universe and all creation and is the one underlying Reality in all beings, known as “Chit or Atma”. The “Chidakasa” of the Supreme Self is the Hridayakasa of the Atma and the ecstasy of the Dance of Siva at Chidambaram (the centre of the universe) is experienced by every soul which is no other than the Divine Chit dwelling in the hearts of beings but perceived by only those who have curbed their passions and desires and controlled their senses and mind and turned them inwards upon the Almighty within. ‘Nataraja’ is the most perfect image of the energy above-described and

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“no artist of today, however great, could more exactly or more wisely create an image of that energy, which science must postulate behind all phenomena”.

THE GLORY OF HINDU ART AND CRAFT

In the case of the Nataraja images in bronze the very best South Indian genius and talent of artistic smithery have been exercised and the various modes of dance have been skillfully reproduced in them. The sculptural exhibition of the various poses of Dance in temple Gopurams are also marvellous. The image of Siva in every one of these Forms has the demon ‘Apasmara-Purusha’ under the foot, the damaru or the drum in one of the right hands and fire in one of the left hands. The image is the form of the ‘Om-kara’ Pranava Swarupa of God and suggestive of (i) the union of Prakriti and Purusha, (ii) the five Divine Functions of creation, preservation, dissolution, embodiment and gracious release (Srshti, Sthiti, Samhara, Tirobahva and Anugraha) and (iii) the meaning of the Holy Panchakshara Mantra – “Namah Sivaya”. His creative drum, protective hand, destructive fire and liberating foot, plunge the beholding souls into Beatitude and merge them into Himself. The Nataraja Dance is thus the emblem of Divine Bliss, Divine Functions and Human Salvation. The ethics and aesthetics of the dance are appealing to every sensitive soul and eminent scholars have dwelt on the meaning of the dance of Siva and the “Nataraja” image, which reveal the glory of the Hindu art and philosophy.

Dr. Anandkumaraswami says: -

“The essential significance of Siva’s dance is three fold. First it is the image of His Rhythmic Activity as the source of all movements within the cosmos, which is represented by the Arch; secondly the purpose of the dance is to release the countless souls of men from the snare of illusion; thirdly, the place of dance, Chidambaram, the centre of the universe, is within the heart. The conception of Siva’s Dance is a synthesis of science, religion and art. In the night of Brahma nature is inert and cannot dance till Siva wills it. He rises from His own rapture and dancing sends through inert matter pulsing waves of awakening sound and Lo! Matter also dances appearing as a glory around about Him. Dancing, He sustains its manifold phenomena. In the fullness of time still dancing. He destroys all forms and names by fire and gives new rest.”

In His “Heart of Aryavaita” the Earl of Ronaldshay says, “The Nataraja is the plastic presentation of a whole philosophy. In the whirl of dance one sees the Primal Energy which gives life to all existence and so sustains the universe. Other aspects of the figure speak of destruction of desire and the attaining of salvation – there is a synthesis of Science, Art and Religion therein.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LATE P. R. KRISHNASWAMY IYER

A true devotee of the Holy Scriptures “Bhagavad Gita” and knower of English, Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit and Grantham languages, he is the author of the Book “Gleanings from the Gita” for which forewords have been given by Late Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, Sir, C. P.

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Ramaswami Iyer, Justice P. Venkataramana Rao, Prof. P. Sankaranarayanan and which was published posthumously by his son Sri. P. K. Venkataraghavan. After the publication several appreciations from great scholars like Dr. T. M. P. Mahadevan, K. Sankara Menon etc., poured in and several reviews appeared in the newspapers and journals.
